The President's Weekly Address
October 17, 2015

Hi, everybody. Thirty years ago, there were 500,000 people behind bars in America. Today, there are 2.2 million. The United States is home to 5 percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Every year, we spend $80 billion to keep people locked up.

Now, many of the folks in prison absolutely belong there. Our streets are safer thanks to the brave police officers and dedicated prosecutors who put violent criminals behind bars. But over the last few decades, we've also locked up more nonviolent offenders than ever before, for longer than ever before. That's one of the real reasons our prison population is so high.

Ever since I was a Senator, I've talked about how, in too many cases, our criminal justice system is a pipeline from underfunded schools to overcrowded jails. And we've taken steps to address it. We've invested in our schools to give at-risk young people a better shot to succeed. I've signed a bill reducing the 100-to-1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine. I've commuted the sentences of dozens of people sentenced under old drug laws we now recognize were unfair. The Department of Justice has gotten "Smart on Crime," refocusing efforts on the worst offenders and pursuing mandatory minimum sentences less frequently.

Still, much of our criminal justice system remains unfair. In recent years, more of our eyes have been opened to this truth, and we can't close them anymore. Good people of all political persuasions are eager to do something about it.

Over the next few weeks, I'll travel the country to highlight some of the Americans who are doing their part to fix our criminal justice system. I'll visit a community battling prescription drug and heroin abuse. I'll speak with leaders from law enforcement who are determined to lower the crime rate and the incarceration rate and with police chiefs who have dedicated their careers to keeping our streets and officers safe. I'll meet with former prisoners who are earning their second chance.

And I'll keep working with lawmakers from both parties who are determined to get criminal justice reform bills to my desk. Earlier this month, Democrats and Republicans came together in the Senate to introduce such a bill, one that would reduce mandatory minimums for nonviolent drug offenders and reward prisoners with shorter sentences if they complete programs that make them less likely to commit a repeat offense. There's a similar bill working its way through the House, and I'm encouraged by these kinds of bipartisan efforts. It is real progress, not liberal ideas or conservative ideas, but commonsense solutions to the challenges we face.

From the halls of Congress to the classrooms in our schools, we pledge allegiance to one Nation under God, with liberty and justice for all. And Justice means that every child deserves a chance to grow up safe and secure, without the threat of violence. Justice means that the punishment should fit the crime. And justice means allowing our fellow Americans who have made mistakes to pay their debt to society and rejoin their community as active, rehabilitated citizens.

Justice has never been easy to achieve, but it's always been worth fighting for. And it's something I'll keep fighting for as long as I have the privilege to serve as your President.

Thanks, and have a great weekend.

NOTE: The address was recorded at approximately 3:45 p.m. on October 16 in the Map Room at the White House for broadcast on October 17. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 16, but was embargoed for release until 6 a.m. on October 17.